

# Forbidden Love

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# Chapter 1

The first time Rebekah really saw him, he stood with his back to her.

It was a Saturday afternoon in June, hot and lazy, and her father had organized a barbecue in the garden of the house where she had grown up. Rebekah had just returned from Amsterdam for the weekend - Lukas had to work, so she had come alone - and she walked out through the sliding doors with two glasses of rosé in her hands. The garden smelled of cut grass and sunburn and the smoke of lighters that her father always used too much. It was a scent that catapulted her back to her childhood, to summers that seemed endless, to a time when everything became more complicated.

She was twenty-six now. No, twenty-seven - her birthday had been in April and she was still getting used to it, as if the number asked her for something she didn't know how to give yet.

James stood by the fence at the end of the garden. He seemed to be looking at the fields starting behind the neighborhood, his hands in his pockets, his shoulders just a little too tense for someone relaxing. He was about forty-five years old, maybe a little older. Dark hair with gray at the temples. A light blue shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows. He stood in a way that betrayed something - something of someone who was used to taking up space without him making an effort.

"Rebekah."

Her father called her name from the terrace. She turned around. But something - she didn't know what afterwards, perhaps an instinct, or the simple fact that he stood in a way that stood out among all the other people who sat and laughed and talked - made her look for a while.

James also turned around. As if he had felt her presence before he saw her.

Their eyes crossed along the length of the garden.

It didn't take more than two seconds. Maybe less. His eyes were dark, calm, and there was something in the way he looked that was not fleeting - not the quick, polite registration of Peter's daughter, who I know vaguely - but somewhat more noticeable, somewhat more thoughtful. Then he smiled. The smile of someone who greets a friend's daughter. Polite and warm and perfectly fitting. And he walked back to the company.

Rebekah gave one of the glasses to her father.

"The wine is nice and cool," she said.

She couldn't remember what was said afterwards.

She stayed in conversations for the rest of the afternoon, laughed at the right times, ate an over-fit burger with too much ketchup because she didn't want to disappoint her father. She talked to the neighbor about a renovation. She helped her mother with the salad. She did everything she always did on afternoons like this.

But she always knew where he was in the garden.

Not because she was watching. Precisely because she didn't look and he was there anyway, somewhere in her peripheral consciousness, like a note in a piece of music that you don't consciously hear but that you miss as soon as it falls away.

Around seven o'clock everyone started to break up. Kisses on the cheeks, promises to meet again soon, the ringed search for keys. James shook her father's hand - the warm, familiar handshake of two men who have been friends for twenty years - and nodded to Rebekah's mother.

And then, as he walked to his car, he looked back.

Not to the garden in general. To her.

It was fast, almost unnotable. And he immediately looked away again, got in the car, drove away.

Rebekah stopped with an empty glass in her hand and a feeling in her chest that she could not name. Not exactly. It wasn't desire, not as she knew it. It was a little softer and at the same time sharper - a kind of recognition, as if she had found something she didn't know she was looking for.

She washed the glass. She helped clean up. She called Lukas to say she was coming back the next morning.

"Did you have a nice weekend?" He asked.

"Yes," she said. "Just."

She almost believed herself.

## Chapter 2

Her father, Peter, had known James for twenty years.

They had studied economics together in Utrecht, had each gone in a different direction after graduation - Peter back to his hometown, James abroad for a job that kept him in London for four years - and had lost each other in the way friendships are sometimes lost: not dramatically, not with quarrels, but just slowly, through distance and new lives and full schedules. And then there had been a reunion, ten years ago, and they had both stood on the same side of the bar and it had been as if the intervening years were just evaporating. Since then they played squash every Thursday evening in the sports center on Koolhovenlaan, then always ate a sandwich at the sports canteen, and called each other if there was anything.

Rebekah knew all this. She had heard it in pieces over the years, casually, at the table or in the car. Her father didn't talk much about his friendships - he was a man who showed that he loved people by appearing before them, not by talking about them - but James was a name that came up regularly. James said this. I spoke to James. James and Vera might come on Christmas.

James was married to Vera. She knew that too. Vera Hoogenbosch - she had kept her maiden name, which Rebekah had always said about who she was. She worked in the cultural sector, something with subsidies and project management for theaters and museums. She was quiet the way certain people are quiet: not shy, not closed, but simply present without the need to fill space. She had sharp cheekbones and always wore something dark blue or moss green and read architecture books for her pleasure. Rebekah had always liked her, in the distant way you like people you don't really know.

They had no children, James and Vera. Rebekah didn't know why, had never thought about it.

In the weeks after the barbecue, she tried not to think about it. About James in general. It had been a moment, a look, an insignificant thing that had grasped her head in a way that was not interesting to analyze. She was someone who could enjoy people, energy, presence. That was all.

She had Lukas. She had three years with Lukas, an apartment in Amsterdam-West that they had furnished together, a life that was good - really good, not the kind of good that you make yourself believe but the kind of good that you recognize without always being happy about it. Lukas was honest and funny and did his dishes and loved her in a way that was consistent and reliable. He was a good man.

She loved him.

She thought of James as she lay in bed next to Lukas and heard the rain tapping against the window. Not in a dramatic way. Just a thought, fleeting and without reason. The way he had looked at her at the fence. The way he rolled up his sleeves.

She turned around. Closed her eyes.

You're tired, she said to herself. You have drunk too much rosé and you work too hard and you are just tired.

She was sleeping.

But the next morning, in the shower, she was very quiet for a moment.

She thought of his eyes. Dark and quiet and remarkable.

She turned the water colder and didn't think about anything anymore.

There was a birthday in September.

Her father turned sixty. Her mother - who had been making plans and refining and adjusting them for weeks - had organized a dinner at a restaurant on the outskirts of the city. Twenty people, a long table in a private room, candles and white linen and a menu that her father had chosen himself but where he had just pretended to be surprised.

Rebekah knew him too well to believe that.

Lukas had come along. He had put on his best jacket and brought flowers for her mother, which had made her mother shine in the way mothers shine when their daughters bring men who do the right things. They sat at the long table, Rebekah between her cousin Sofie and a former colleague of her father, Lukas two chairs away next to an uncle who always talked too loudly about politics.

James and Vera sat on the other side of the table. Obliquely opposite her. Vera in dark blue, as expected. James in a dark gray suit without a tie, the top button open.

Rebekah didn't notice it right away. She was talking to Sofie, who had just got a new job and was talking about it, and she laughed at something, took her glass of water, looked at the menu.

And then she looked up.

James was already looking at her.

Not fleeting, not accidental. He looked at her with the same calm and directness as on the barbecue, but now they were closer and there was more light and she could see that there

was something behind his gaze that was not polite and not neutral - something she recognized because she felt it herself and that was exactly the problem.

He didn't look away when she crossed hers. That was the strange, the disturbing, the undeniable. He just looked at her. Calm. Directly.

Rebekah looked away. She knew for sure that her face hadn't betrayed anything - she was good at that kind of thing, had always had a poker face that made her mother desperate - but her heart was beating a little too fast. She turned to Sofie, nodded, said something about the new job, something encouraging, she didn't remember what.

The speeches began. Her uncle said a little too long something too sentimental. A colleague of her father made a joke that everyone knew but still laughed. Rebekah applauded at the right times.

She didn't look at the other side of the table.

Or she tried at least.

After dinner, everyone got up and mixed in, the kind of post-dinner chaos of moving bodies and replenished glasses and loud conversations. Rebekah talked to her father, hugged him, said she was happy to be there. He squeezed her shoulder and said that she had been the most beautiful gift of the evening, which he always said and what she always thought laughed ridiculously exaggerated and deeply beautiful at the same time.

She walked to the bar for water.

James was already there.

"Water?" He said. He was already holding the bottle.

"Please."

He poured in. Their fingers didn't touch when he indicated the glass. But it was the kind of movement where you know how close you are to something without hitting it.

"Nice evening," he said.

"My father deserves it."

"He certainly does." He looked at her. "You too, by the way."

"What?"

"Have a nice evening." He smiled, a small smile that hid something and betrayed something at the same time. "You look good, Rebekah."

It was an innocent sentence. The phrase a friend of your father says at a birthday party.  
Completely normal.

But the way he said her name.

She took her glass. "Thank you," she said. Her voice was calm. "You too."

She walked back to Lukas.

That night, in the hotel where they had checked in because she thought the ride to Amsterdam was too far after such an evening, she was awake while Lukas slept next to her. She stared at the ceiling. She thought of the way he had said her name. Rebekah. Not quickly, not casually. Each syllable in its place.

She turned around. She closed her eyes.

She didn't sleep for an hour.

## Chapter 3

It was Vera who set everything in motion, without knowing it.

She called on a Thursday morning in October. Rebekah was at work, behind her desk with three open files on her screen and a coffee that had already become cold, and she saw the name on her phone and felt something for a fraction of a second that she could not name before she recorded.

"Rebekah, with Vera. Vera Hoogenbosch, the wife of James. I hope I'm not bothering you?"

"No, not at all." She pushed her chair back a little. "How is it?"

"Good, good." Vera's voice was exactly as Rebekah remembered it - civilized, calm, always just a little more thoughtful than the average voice. "I wanted to ask you something. Peter said you work as an interior designer?"

"That's right."

"We bought an apartment. In the city. It has beautiful bones - high ceilings, original parquet, large windows - but we honestly don't know what to do with it. And I thought, now that we are such... indirect neighbors of your father, maybe you want to take a look? If you have time. I'll just pay you for your advice, that goes without saying."

Rebekah held her pen without doing anything with it.

Say you're busy, said a voice in her head. Say you have a waiting period of three months. Give her a colleague's number.

"When is it convenient for you?" She said.

She had no idea why she said that. Or maybe she knew and didn't want to know.

The first appointment was on a Tuesday morning. Vera let her walk through the empty apartment - she was right about the bones, it was a space with character and potential, the kind of place Rebekah normally got excited about - and Rebekah gave her advice on the layout, on how the light fell south in the afternoon, on which original elements should be preserved and which could easily disappear. Vera listened attentively, took notes on her phone, asked good questions.

James wasn't there.

Rebekah noticed his absence. She noticed that she noticed his absence. She found it disturbing that she noticed his absence, but did nothing with it except put it away in a corner of herself that she had not looked at for the time being.

On the way back on the tram - she had left the car at home, parking in the city center was a nightmare - she stared at the streets sliding by and thought of nothing. Or that's he tried. She thought of the layout of the apartment, of a wall that had to disappear, of the color of the tiles in the bathroom that Vera had shown on her phone.

She thought about the question of whether he would be there next time.

She was ashamed of that thought. But she was ashamed of the distant way you are ashamed of something you don't change anyway.

The second appointment was a Friday afternoon, two weeks later.

Vera texted the morning before: Rebekah, unfortunately I have a meeting that is running out. James may be there to let you in. Is that good?

Rebekah read the message in the kitchen, with her coat already on, about to go to the office. She read it once. One more time.

She replied, "No problem.

She put her phone in her pocket and walked out.

She hardly thought about anything for the rest of the morning. She worked. She had a meeting. She ate a sandwich behind her desk. She sent three emails. She did her job.

At half past four she left the office and walked to the apartment.

James was already there. The front door was ajar. She walked up the stairs - second floor, high steps, the kind of stairs that told you something about how old the building was - and it was in the hallway when she entered. Two cups of coffee in his hands, from the coffee shop on the corner two blocks away.

"I was hoping you didn't take milk," he said.

"Black is fine."

He gave her a cup. Their fingers didn't touch each other. She was aware of it in a way that irritated her.

"Vera said you know what needs to be done," he said. "I don't. I'm just coming to watch and trying not to look stupid."

"That's a reasonable strategy."

He laughed. It was a real laugh, not polite, not staged. It sounded less controlled than his looks.

They walked through the apartment. Rebekah explained what she had come up with - the partition wall that could be removed to connect the living room to the dining area, the way you could send the light with light floors and dark walls, the kitchen that had to be moved to the window. He listened attentively, asked questions that showed that he had really listened and not just waited for them to be spoken. He made her laugh with a comment about his absolute inability to imagine how a space could look different than at that moment.

"I'm literally standing in an empty room and I only see an empty room," he said. "You see a complete house."

"That's the job," she said.

"No," he said. "That's talent."

They stood by the large window in the living room. The courtyard downstairs was deserted in the early November light, a couple of bicycles against the wall, a child playing in a sandbox without a parent being visible. Rebekah looked outside. She felt him standing next to her, not close, but present in a way she registered in her whole body.

"You did this well," he said.

"What?"

"Choosing this profession. You see things I would never see."

She didn't know exactly why that sentence hit her harder than he should have. It was a compliment. People always complimented her work, which was part of her profession. But he said it in a way that was about more than her work, in a way that said: I see you. And that was the dangerous thing.

She stepped aside. "There are a few more things I want to meass," she said.

She took her notepad. She matted the width of the window. She wrote down things she couldn't read later because her handwriting had become a little too small, too checked.

James leaned against the wall and watched.

"How long have you been doing this?" He asked.

"Five years. Celebrate officially, if you don't count my internship."

"Are you happy with it?"

She looked up. "What a question."

"A bad one?"

"No." She thought for a moment. "An unexpected one."

"I sometimes wonder that about people," he said. "They chose the right one. Whether at some point it ceases to be a choice and just becomes who you are."

"And you?" She asked, before she could stop it. "Are you happy with what you have chosen?"

He looked at her. Long. Too long for someone who answered the question with a simple yes.

"Sometimes," he said.

She wrote something on. She didn't remember what.

She stayed for another twenty minutes. She left with a polite farewell and the promise to send Vera an overview of her findings. On the stairs down she put her hand on the railing and felt the cold iron and thought: this is not good for anything.

She didn't believe herself.

But she said it anyway, again, on the tram home. Like a mantra. Like a prayer.

This is not good for anything.

## Chapter 4

They started texting each other.

It started innocently in a way that was never as innocent as it looked afterwards. He sent a photo of a tile that Vera had found at a market - large, Mediterranean, far too busy for the style they had discussed - with the text: Vera is enthusiastic. I am the right person to disappoint her. Can you help me formulate this diplomatically?

Rebekah had laughed. She had written back: Say that it has character but that it will dominate the space. Use the word "overwhelming" positively but with subtle doubt. She gets it.

He had returned: You are a diplomat and a designer. Impressive.

She had sent a smiling emoji and put her phone away.

But she had picked up her phone faster than usual when a new message came in.

It worked, he wrote. She put the tile back. You saved our marriage.

She smiled. You are welcome.

Those kinds of messages, in the beginning. Questions about the apartment, funny comments, light conversation. Nothing that could not be passed. Nothing Lukas shouldn't have read. She checked herself on that criterion and found the messages go through the test, and that reassured her in a way that might be a bit too active for something that was really innocent.

Because there was something underneath.

Underneath was the silence between the sentences. The way he always answered quickly - not too fast, but fast enough. The way he asked questions about her work that ended in questions about her, not in a cross-border way but in a way that showed that he was interested. Not in the designer. In her.

How was your weekend? He sent it on a Monday.

Good. Amsterdam in autumn is almost unbearable of beauty when the sun is on it.

Have you been outside?

Long walk along the IJ. You?

I tried to walk but it rained here all day. I finally started a book that I had wanted to read for a year.

What kind of book?

And then they had exchanged twenty messages about a novel by Ian McEwan, about what literature does with time, about whether you can appreciate a bad ending if it's honest. They were conversations she had with no one else - not with Lukas, who loved thrillers and had no patience for literary fiction, not with her friends who read but read differently, faster, for relaxation instead of for that indefinable something she was looking for in books.

She talked to James about things she didn't know she wanted to discuss until he asked.

That was dangerous. More dangerous than physical attraction, she knew that. Bodies were simple. Spirits were more complicated. If someone understood your thoughts, if someone recognized your way of looking and said something back that was true - that was the kind of connection that people gave up everything for.

She didn't say this to herself in that wording. She didn't consciously think about it. She just picked up her phone when there was a message, and she answered, and she put it down again with a feeling in her chest that she didn't investigate carefully.

Lukas didn't notice anything. Or he noticed something but didn't have a word for it. He was a man who loved her in a direct, uncomplicated way, who didn't always look at what was underneath things. That was sometimes a relief and sometimes a loneliness.

That night she ate with him at the table. He talked about his work, a project that ran out, a colleague who irritated him in a way he could describe well. She listened. She said the good things. She held his hand as they watched a movie on the couch.

And after he slept, she sent James a message: Have you finished reading the book?

He replied after three minutes: This afternoon. The last page was exactly as I feared and yet it hit me harder than I expected.

That's how a good writer works, she wrote back. You know what's coming and it hurts.

There was a pause of a few minutes. Then: Does that also apply to things other than books?

Rebekah stared at the point. She read it twice. Three times.

She knew exactly what he meant.

She didn't answer. She put her phone away. She was lying in the dark next to a sleeping Lukas and felt her heart beating in a way she recognized but didn't want to recognize.

The next morning she wrote: Sometimes, I think.

She sent it. She closed her phone. She got up and made coffee and stood by the window and looked down the street and thought: you have a choice now. You can stop this now.

She didn't make the choice.

## Chapter 5

The third time in the apartment was in early December.

Vera had sent a list of questions about suppliers and materials - Rebekah had given her an overview of contractors she trusted, tile companies, parquet floor specialists - and asked if Rebekah could come along when she spoke to the contractor. She wanted someone to ask the right questions.

James would be there too.

Rebekah had said yes without hesitation and then sat at her desk for an hour and stared at a blank screen.

She wore the dark gray cardigan that Lukas had given her for her birthday that morning and pants that she rarely wore because he felt too neat for the office. She had let her hair down instead of up. She noticed that she was doing this and found it disturbing and did it anyway.

You just wear your hair loose, she said to herself. That says nothing.

The apartment smelled of fresh sawdust and lime. The contractor - a man in his fifties with big hands and an infectiously direct way of talking - was already in the living room with a notepad. Vera was there. James was there.

He stood at the door to the balcony and nodded at her when she entered. Nothing special. A nod.

She felt it in her throat.

The meeting lasted an hour. Rebekah asked questions about the load-bearing walls, the electrical wiring, the underfloor heating. She was good at her job and that helped - it had something anchors, the concentration it required, the focus on materials and sizes and schedules. She felt competent and clear and present.

James stood next to her by the kitchen wall while she listened to the contractor. Their arms did not touch each other. There were at least thirty centimeters between them. But she was aware of every inch.

After the meeting, when the contractor left and Vera called from the hallway - her mother, a conversation that apparently lasted longer than expected - Rebekah and James stood alone in the living room.

It was the first time they were really alone.

There was a silence. Not uncomfortable. Something else.

"You know what you're doing," he said.

"I'm trying."

"No, really." He stood by the window, his hands in his pockets, the same posture as months ago at the fence in her father's garden. "The way you talked to him. You knew exactly when to ask and when to let him talk."

"Considers want to be heard," she said. "Just like everyone else."

"You hear people well."

She looked at him. "James."

"Yes?"

She didn't know what she wanted to say. She had said his name as a border, as a reminder, but she didn't know what was to come next.

He looked at her. Quiet, as always. But there was something in his eyes that was not quiet - something that was kept carefully but had not disappeared.

"I know this is a bad idea," he said.

Her heart stood still. "What's a bad idea?"

"This conversation."

She was glad that Vera's voice sounded from the hallway, cheerful and apologizing: "Sorry, sorry, my mother can't possibly be short of dust-"

They both walked a step back before Vera entered the room. Not flashy. Just. They were already at a normal distance from each other but still she took that step, instinctively.

Vera looked from one to the other. Rebekah saw her watching and kept her face completely neutral.

"Everything okay?" Vera asked.

"Fine," James said. "Rebekah just explained to me why the kitchen has to go to the left."

Vera turned her attention to the kitchen. Rebekah started talking about placement and light. She talked well. She talked with authority and knowledge and she showed nothing.

On the stairs outside, after saying goodbye to Vera with kisses on the cheeks and promises about a next appointment, she walked out without looking back.

She was on the street. December, cold, the sky low and gray.

I know this is a bad idea.

She could have said: what exactly? She could have pretended she didn't understand. She had denied, stopped, ended the conversation before he had begun.

But she had said his name as a border and not drawn a border.

She walked to the tram stop. She didn't look back at the building. She got on the tram and sat down and looked at her own reflection in the window - her hair down, her face calm, the face of someone in control of everything.

Her phone was shaking.

A message from James: I think we need to talk.

She read it. She read it again.

She put her phone in her pocket without answering.

But she did answer that evening. At eleven o'clock, after Lukas slept and the apartment was quiet and she stood by the kitchen window with a glass of water she didn't drink.

When? She wrote.

And she knew, while sending it, that she opened a door that she would never be able to close completely.

## Chapter 6

They met on a Wednesday afternoon in January.

Not in the apartment - that was too connected to Vera, for a reason, with a context that protected them from themselves. James had sent a name: a coffee shop in the Jordaan, a small cafe on the corner of two streets that Rebekah knew but rarely visited. Neutral territory. Or something like that.

She told Lukas that she had an appointment with a customer.

It wasn't entirely a lie. Or that she said to herself as she put on her coat and grabbed her keys and closed the door behind her. James was technically a customer. She did work for him and Vera. They started talking. Nothing had happened.

Nothing had happened.

Outside it was cold the way January is cold: dry and sharp, the air colorless, the streets empty to the early cyclists who were driving with their heads in their coats. Rebekah walked. She could have taken the tram but she wanted to walk, wanted to feel the cold, wanted to clear her head before she arrived. She hadn't slept for half the night. She had stared at the ceiling while Lukas next to her breathed with the regular rest of someone with a clear conscience, and she had thought about what she would say.

She had no idea what she was going to say.

The cafe was small and warm and smelled of espresso and something with cinnamon. Wooden tables, high windows with fogged windows, a barista who looked at her with the polite indifference of someone who sees people come and go. James was already sitting in the back, by the window, a cup of coffee for him. He stood up when she came in.

He shouldn't have done that. It was an unnecessary gesture, the kind of gesture that betrayed something about how he saw her: not as a business relationship, not as a friend's daughter. Like someone you stood up for.

She gave her coat to the coat rack. She ordered a coffee at the bar. She walked up to him and sat across from him.

"Hello," he said.

"Hello."

There was a silence. Not unpleasant. It was the kind of silence that arises between two people who both know that what they are going to say is important and do not want to start it too early.

"I'm not sure how to handle this," he finally said.

"I don't know that either."

He looked at his coffee cup. He had strong hands, she could see that now that she was sitting so close. Wide fingers, a watch with a leather strap. He moved his thumb over the edge of the head in a way that seemed unconscious, perhaps a habit.

"I'm not going to tell you that I didn't see this coming," he said. "Because that wouldn't be fair."

"No," she said. "It wouldn't."

"And I'm not going to pretend I know exactly what this is either." He looked up. "But I do know what I feel when I see you. And I'm old enough not to confuse that with something it's not."

Rebekah held her cup without drinking. She looked at him. She had decided to be quiet, measured, to use this conversation to put an end to it - to them say: I get it, I feel it too, and that's exactly why we're going to stop this. She had rehearsed that sentence in her head on the walk here.

"How long?" She asked instead.

"How long what?"

"How long have you felt this?"

He thought. She appreciated that he did not answer quickly, did not give the answer that was the most flat faithful. "From the barbecue in June," he said. "But I didn't do anything with it for a long time because there was nothing to do with it."

"There is still nothing to do with it."

"No," he said. "That's right."

They looked at each other. Outside, a bicycle passed by, a child on the luggage rack, a father who kicked with the concentrated power of someone who wants to be somewhere on time.

"I have a friend," Rebekah said. "You have a wife. You are my father's friend." She summed it up, calmly, as if she was reading a list. "There are not many situations that go beyond the boundaries than this one."

"I know that."

"And yet you're sitting here."

"And yet you're sitting here."

She couldn't deny that. She was here. She had said yes. She had come walking through the January cold because she wanted to have this conversation, because she wanted to see him, because there was something in her that turned out to be stronger than all the good reasons to stay away.

"What do you want, James?"

The question hung between them. He rubbed his chin with his hand - a gesture from someone who thinks, who wants to be honest. "I want to know if you feel what I feel," he said. "More than that. For now."

For now. Two words with a world in them.

"That's not fair," she said.

"No."

"If I say yes, we'll open a door that-"

"I know."

"James."

"I know, Rebekah." His voice was quiet but there was something in it - something that creaked at the edges. "I'm not asking you to do anything. I'm just asking you to be honest. To me and to yourself."

She looked at her coffee. The milk foam had already sunked a bit.

She could have lied. It would have been easy. She could have finished the coffee, grabbed her coat, drawn a friendly but definitive line. She was good at drawing boundaries. She was good at controlling things.

But she had walked here in the January cold. And that said it all.

"Yes," she said. Soft. Almost whispering.

He said nothing. He nodded. Once. As if he received a confirmation of something he already knew but whose confirmation still did something to him.

They sat in that cafe for another hour. They talked - not about what they were going to do, not about how to proceed, but just, in the way they had also texted, about books and work and the city and small things that grew up because of the attention they put into it together. They laughed. He made a comment about his own character that was so accurate that she laughed louder than she wanted.

And then, by the coat rack, he helped her put on her coat. His hands were on her shoulders for a second. No longer. But she stood still. She felt his warmth through the fabric of her coat and closed her eyes and opened them again before she would do something that could not be turned back.

"I see you," he said.

She knew he wasn't talking about their next appointment.

She walked outside. The cold hit her. She walked the first two streets fast, as if leaving something behind, and then slower, and at the bridge she stopped and looked at the dark water and felt her heart beat in a way that looked too much like life.

She was in love.

She had known it for weeks without naming it. Now she named it, here by the bridge, in the January cold, alone, and it was worse and more beautiful and terrifying than she had thought.

She picked up her phone. She didn't want to call him. She called Lukas.

"Hey," he said. "How was the appointment?"

"Good," she said. "Just good. I'm on my way home."

"I made pasta."

"Nice."

She hung up. She walked on.

She thought of his hands on her shoulders.

She thought of Lukas who had made pasta.

She thought of her father who knew James as the most honest man he knew.

And she walked home and opened the door and smelled the pasta and hung up her coat and kissed Lukas on the cheek and sat down at the table and ate and talked and laughed and did everything she always did.

And some of her wasn't there at all.

## Chapter 7

February came with rain.

Weeks of rain, the kind that was not dramatic but persistent - a constant, gray presence that seemed to wrap the city, kept the streets dark, drove people in. Rebekah was happy with the excuse. She worked a lot, said that projects kept her busy, stayed late in the office and had a lot of coffee and talked to colleagues in a way that felt normal but was not.

They and James texted every day.

It wasn't just about the apartment anymore. It had never been just about the apartment again, but now the appearance had also disappeared - they texted in the morning about nothing, about the news, about a sentence from a book that had touched her, about his irritation at his work that he described with the dry humor that she had come to know as his way of dealing with things. They sent each other music. They sent photos of things they saw - a facade in the rain, a shop window that was exactly wrong, a dog that looked like a philosopher.

It was intimate in the way that only everyday things can be intimate. Not the big gestures, not the dramatic confessions. Just be present at someone's day. Just being seen in the little things.

Lukas noticed her phone. Not the texting - she always did that, for her work, for friends - but the way she handled it. A little too fast. A little too attentive.

"Pressy project?" He asked one evening.

She looked up. "What?"

He nodded to her phone. "You've been on it for fifteen minutes."

"Oh." She laid him down. "Customer with questions. Sorry."

He looked at her for a moment. Not suspicious - Lukas was not a suspicious person, that was one of the things she had appreciated so much in the beginning and now felt as something different. He looked at her the way of someone who registers something but doesn't know what to do with it.

"You haven't always been there lately," he said.

It was a gentle observation, not an accusation. That made it worse.

"I'm just busy," she said. "It will get better when this project is over."

He nodded. He believed her. He put his arm around her on the couch and continued the movie and she leaned against him and felt terrible in a way she deserved but still cut.

That night, after he slept, she picked up her phone.

I feel bad, they sent.

James answered after a few minutes. Why?

Because this is not fair.

A longer break. Then: No. That's not it.

But you don't stop either, she wrote. It was an observation, not a reproach.

No, he wrote back. Neither do you.

She stared at the screen. The light from her phone in the dark bedroom. Lukas next to her, his breathing regularly.

What are we doing? She sent.

It took a long time for him to answer. Long enough that she thought he had gone to sleep, or had decided not to answer the question. But then: I think we try to understand what this is before we do something that can't be turned back.

What if we never understand that?

Then at least we have been honest with ourselves.

She put her phone down. She stared at the ceiling.

Honest with himself. That was exactly the problem. She had been honest with herself - she knew what she felt, she had named it, she had admitted it - and that being honest had not protected her. It had just pulled her deeper into it. As if naming the desire had enlarged it rather than reduced it.

She woke up with a sense of privacy. Not happy, not unhappy. Just decided. As if her body had determined something while her head was sleeping.

She had to see him.

Don't call. Don't text. See.

She organized it in a way that didn't feel like organizing but like a coincidence, although she knew better herself. She called Vera about the apartment - decisions were needed about the bathroom tiles, could she come by? - and Vera said she would be in the apartment on Thursday, but only in the morning, in the afternoon she had meetings. Wasn't it more convenient if James was there? He worked at home that day, he could easily get there.

"That's fine," said Rebekah. Her voice was completely neutral.

Thursday. Two o'clock in the afternoon. The apartment.

She didn't say anything about it to James. She didn't have to say it. She suspected that he already knew.

Thursday was gray and wet. She took the tram and got off too early and walked the last two streets, her umbrella useless in the wind that made the rain horizontal. She stood in front of the building, looked for the key in her bag - Vera had given her a key weeks ago, for coming and going - and walked up the stairs.

James opened before she could knock. He had heard her on the stairs.

They were standing in the doorway. Her coat was dripping. Her hair was wet at the edges.

"You're soaked," he said.

"It's raining."

"Come in."

The apartment was further advanced in the renovation. The partition was gone, the space now open, bigger than she expected. There was dust in the air and there were protective sheets on the floor. It smelled of cement and new things.

He had made coffee on the small hob that the contractor had left for the working days. He gave her a cup. She took off her coat and hung it over a ladder chair and walked through the room, professional, judging, as if she was here for her work.

She was here for her work. That was also true.

She discussed the tiles. She had taken three options on her tablet, photos from showrooms, quotes. He watched as she explained what each would do with the space, how the light would fall on shiny versus matte surfaces, what the practical considerations were.

He stood next to her. Close. Not inappropriately tight, but tight enough.

"The second one," he said. "Vera also likes the second one best."

"Good choice." She scrolled further. "The floor at that I would then in-"

"Rebekah."

She stopped.

"Look at me."

She put her tablet down on the window sill. She turned around. She looked at him.

He stood at maybe half a meter. His eyes were calm, as always, but there was something in his face that was different than usual, something unprotected, something he normally didn't show.

"I've been thinking all week," he said.

"Me too."

"I don't know how this ends well."

"I don't know that either."

"I don't even know if there's a good outcome."

"No."

They looked at each other. The rain hit the windows. Somewhere in the building someone was drilling - a short, repeated sound, far away.

"But I want to know you," he said. "I want to know how you think and what scares you and what keeps you awake at night. I want-" He was silent for a moment. "I want more than I want."

Rebekah felt something move in her chest. Don't pinch, don't hurt - but move, when ice that starts to come loose.

"That's not fair," she said. Her voice was not completely fixed.

"I know." He took a step towards her. "But I've stopped pretending it's not."

She could have stepped back. There was enough space. She had grabbed her tablet, put on her jacket, said she would forward the options to Vera and that they could arrange it further by email. She could have closed the door behind her and never come back.

She didn't take a step back.

James reached out his hand and ran his fingertips down her cheek - light, almost questioning, like someone who isn't sure if what he's touching is real. Rebekah closed her eyes.

It was the first time he touched her.

She had thought it would be overwhelming, a big moment, cinematic. It wasn't cinematic. It was soft and quiet and it felt like something that had been determined for a long time, like the end of a sentence that had lasted too long.

She opened her eyes. She looked at him.

And then he kissed her.

It wasn't a wild kiss, not hungry, not the kind of kiss you see in movies about forbidden love. It was quiet and careful and completely sure at the same time. His hand on her cheek. Her hands - she didn't know when it happened - on his chest.

They kissed in a half-converted living room in the rain, while somewhere in the building someone was drilling, while her phone was in her bag with probably a message from Lukas about what they wanted to eat that night.

She stopped.

She took a step back. She brought her hand to her mouth, not theatrical, but instinctively, as if she wanted to hold the kiss and get rid of it at the same time.

"James," she said.

"I know."

"We can't do this-"

"I know." But he didn't look sorry. He looked at her with a calmness that made her sick of desire and fear at the same time.

She took her tablet. She took her coat. She grabbed her bag.

"I'll send Vera the options this afternoon," she said.

"Okay."

She walked to the door. She stopped at the threshold for a moment. She didn't look back.

"James," she said. "Tell me you're sorry."

A silence.

"I can't," he said.

She walked down the stairs. Outside it was still running. She walked in the rain without picking up her umbrella and felt the water in her hair and down her neck and thought of nothing but his mouth on hers and the impossible, delightful, terrible certainty of that one moment.

## Chapter 8

She sent Vera the options. She wrote a professional email, clear and concise, with three attachments and a recommendation. She put a point behind the mail. She sent him.

She stared at her screen for another twenty minutes before opening a new tab and pretending to be working.

She had kissed him. Or he had kissed her. The boundary between them was as thin as paper and it didn't matter either - they had kissed each other and they had long wanted it and it had now happened and there was no way to stop it.

That was the thing with the boundaries exceeded. They didn't disappear anymore. You couldn't put them back. You could ignore them, turn away from them, convince yourself that it was a mistake that you would not repeat - but the border itself was gone. And what was behind it was now accessible in a way that had not been before.

She drove home that evening, bought groceries on the way, made food. Lukas was home early for once - he had canceled a meeting, he said, he was just tired. They ate at the table. He talked about a colleague, about plans for the weekend, about whether they wanted to visit his mother the week after.

"Yes, good," she said.

She cleared the table. She washed up. She did the normal things.

And that night, next to Lukas, she really felt the extent of what she was doing for the first time. Not abstract - she had already recognized the abstract, had already remembered the words: aperty, deception, betrayal. But now, with his breathing next to her and the darkness around her, she felt it concrete. Lukas who said he was tired and canceled the meeting. Lukas who cooked for her on nights when she was late. Lukas who loved her in a way he never questioned.

She felt sick of guilt.

But she woke up the next morning and picked up her phone and there was a message from James that had been sent at midnight: I have no regrets. I wish I had that.

And guilt shared his space with something that was warm and painful and alive, and she didn't know how to carry those two things side by side but she wore them anyway.

She didn't answer right away. She made coffee, she was in the shower, she got dressed for the office. She did her normal things in her normal order and tried to feel normal.

At nine o'clock, on the bike to the office, she stopped at a red light and said: Neither did I.

She continued cycling. The light turned green. The city moved around her.

They didn't see each other for two weeks.

It was a silent distance - not discussed, not agreed, but present. They texted less, fleetingly, about cows and calves. They both kept distance in a way that felt like holding breath, like waiting.

Rebekah used the two weeks to convince herself that she could leave it. That the kiss was an incident, a moment of weakness, something they could swallow and bury and couldn't come back on. She was good at making things wrong when she tried. She was intelligent enough to build the arguments and fain enough to believe them.

It worked until her father called.

"James asked how you are doing," her father said. In the middle of a conversation about something else, about the renovation of his own bathroom. "He said Vera is very happy with the work you do."

"Nice to hear," she said.

"Good man, James," said her father. "A really good man. I'm glad you get to know him and Vera better, you and Lukas."

She said nothing.

"Rebekah?"

"Yes, sorry. I was distracted for a while."

After the conversation, she sat quietly at her desk for a long time. A good man. Her father's voice, warm and convinced. Her father who didn't know - who was never allowed to know - who had known James for twenty years and trusted him about the way you trust someone who has become part of the fabric of your life.

She thought of Vera. To her cheekbones and her dark blue clothes and her architecture books. Vera who gave her a key. Vera who had called her because Peter had said Rebekah could be trusted.

She had to stop this.

She took that for herself on a Tuesday, clear and determined, with the certainty of someone who has made a decision and is done with it. She would limit communication to

the professional. She would finish the renovation, business and correct, and then she would take a step back. She would be good for Lukas. She wouldn't disappoint her father. She wouldn't betray Vera.

She held this decision for three days.

On the fourth day, James sent her a photo of a page from a book - a sentence underlined in pencil, a sentence about the difference between what we choose and what happens to us. No accompanying message. Just the picture.

She looked at it for a long time.

She sent back: When will I see you?

She hated herself a little. But less than she expected.

## Chapter 9

They saw each other on a Friday.

Rebekah had made an excuse that came easily, too easy for her own comfort - a friend who needed help looking for an apartment, an afternoon of sightseeing. Lukas had said: nice, good luck. He had given her a chiss and started running.

She had taken a taxi to an address James had sent - not the apartment this time, but a neighborhood on the east side of the city where they rarely came. A cafe with darkened windows and leather benches and jazz that was just soft enough not to stand out.

He was already there. That was his habit, she saw, always being earlier than her. As if he wanted to know the space before they arrived. She wondered if he always did that, with everyone, or only with her.

He stood up. He always did that.

They sat down. They ordered. There was a moment of silence that was different from the previous silences - closer, heavier, loaded with everything that had not been said in recent weeks.

"I've been thinking," she said.

"I know that."

"I've decided we should stop."

He looked at her. "Okay."

"I mean it."

"I know."

"You don't believe me."

"Yes," he said quietly. "I think you mean it. I also think you won't succeed. Not because you're weak - you're not weak. But because this is not something you get rid of with a decision."

She wanted to get angry. That would have been easier. Anger had structure, had direction, gave you something to push against. But he was right and they both knew he was right and no anger was possible about that, only the silent recognition of something greater than her willpower.

"What do you want then?" She asked.

"I want you," he said. Simple. Without a sting.

She looked at the table top. She thought of Lukas. She thought of her father. She thought of Vera who read architecture books and chose the wrong tiles and trusted her with a key and an apartment and her husband who was standing there.

"This is going to hurt people," she said.

"Yes."

"You don't care enough."

"I care more than you think." His voice was not defensive. "But I've been wondering in recent months - how much pain is acceptable to avoid before you lose yourself in the avoidance? I've been living a life of doing the right things for a long time."

"And that's not luck?"

"Sometimes I do. And sometimes it's just neat."

She looked up. "Vera loves you."

"Yes." No hesitation. "She loves me the way two people love each other who have been together for a long time and know each other's habits and respect each other's space. That's real. I do not deny that." He looked at her. "But I haven't felt the way in the past twenty years as I have in the last six months."

There was a long silence. Outside a tram passed by, the familiar sound that Amsterdam always made, inestable and rhythmic.

"I'm your best friend's daughter," she said.

"I know."

"That makes this even more-"

"I know, Rebekah." Now there was something in his voice, a kind of fracture, very small.

"I know it all. I know all the reasons. And I'm sitting here anyway."

She looked at him. She saw a man of almost fifty who had been careful all his life and now held something that he knew was dangerous and still did not let go. She saw no recklessness in him - no adrenaline rush, no midlife crisis energy. She saw someone who felt something that overtook him and who was honest enough not to deny it.

She understood that. She understood it deeply.

"Once," she said. She herself heard how it sounded - incomplete, unbelievable, a sentence she couldn't finish.

"Once what?" He asked softly.

She didn't answer.

He put his hand over the table. Not to grab hers - he just put it down, palm up, in the middle of the table. An offer. No pressure.

She looked at his hand. She thought of all the times she had said his name as a border and had not drawn a limit. She thought of the apartment in the rain, his fingers along her cheek.

She put her hand in his.

They sat for a moment, in the middle of a cafe with jazz and leather benches, their hands folded over a small table, and Rebekah felt something she couldn't name well - no euphoria, no redemption. A little quieter. Something that felt like capitulation and anchoring at the same time.

"I'm scared," she said.

"I know that."

"I don't know how this will end."

"I don't know that either."

"That's not an answer."

"No." He squeezed her hand for a moment. "But it's fair."

They stayed until the cafe started filling up with the early evening people. They talked, they were silent, they drank their coffee cold. At one point, for no reason, he said something that made her laugh - really laugh, the unexpected kind - and she looked at his face while he laughed and thought: this is how we got here. Not through the pillows. Because of this.

By laughing at the same kind of things.

By knowing.

They said goodbye on the sidewalk. No kiss this time. He pressed his lips to her temple for a second - so fleeting that it almost didn't happen - and walked away.

She stood on the sidewalk of a street on the east side of the city and knew that she had made a decision that she had not spoken out loud but that had been made anyway, in the silence of folded hands and shared laughter.

She hadn't stopped.

She wasn't going to stop.

She took a deep breath. She called a taxi. She drove home, to Lukas, to the apartment they had furnished together with the sofa that was too big for the space but which they both wanted to keep.

Lukas was from his running training. He smelled of fresh air and sweat. He kissed her on the mouth and asked if she had eaten.

"Not really," she said.

"Then I'll make something."

She watched him open the refrigerator and look inside with the concentrated gaze of someone who wants to create something from leftovers. She knew that look. She had seen that look a thousand times.

She loved him. That was also true.

How you could carry two conflicting truths at the same time - that was something she had no answer to. But she wore them anyway.

She took off her coat. She sat down at the table. She watched Lukas cook.

And somewhere in another neighborhood of the city, James drove home, to Vera, to his own table and his own lie and his own carrying weight.

## Chapter 10

March suddenly brought light.

After the gray perseverance of January and February, the sun broke through in a way that felt almost exaggerated - too bright, too present, like a commentary on everything she had tried to keep in the dark. Amsterdam glom. The canals reflected the light. People took their bikes out of the shed and drove their faces up.

Rebekah cycled to work and felt it on her skin and thought of James.

She always thought of James.

That had become the new reality, so normal to breathe that she almost forgot to notice it until she noticed it. He was present in her head in a way that had nothing to do with the frequency of their contact - they no longer spoke every day, had found a rhythm that was more cautious, more careful - but with the density of thought. A smell on the street that reminded him. A sentence in a book. A way the light fell on a building.

She was getting lost in someone and she knew it and she did it anyway.

She had scheduled a therapy session on a Thursday morning. Not because of the situation - she'd seen her therapist for years, a woman in her sixties with shelves running from floor to ceiling and a way of listening that made you feel like your words were safely stored somewhere. Rebekah went every six weeks, sometimes less, for what she called maintenance. A check-in. A space to hear things she didn't just say to herself.

She went on that Thursday and sat in the familiar chair opposite Margriet and started talking about her work and stopped a sentence halfway through.

Margriet waited.

"There's someone," Rebekah said.

A silence. "Someone?"

"Someone who is not my friend."

Margriet's face did not change. That was one of the things Rebekah appreciated in her: the complete absence of judgment in her expression. Not indifference - attention. But no shock, no disapproval.

"Tell me," said Margriet.

Rebekah told. She told it chronologically, calmly, to the tone of someone explaining a case - the barbecue, the birthday party, Vera who had asked her for the apartment, the coffee appointments, the messages, the kiss in the rain. She told it without dramatizing and without minimizing it.

When she finished, she was silent.

Margriet sat still for a moment. Then: "How do you feel about it?"

"Horrible." A break. "And alive. At the same time."

"These are not conflicting feelings."

"I know that." Rebekah looked at her hands. "That doesn't make it any easier."

"What do you want?"

"That's the question I can't answer myself properly."

"Try it anyway."

She thought. Long. Outside, a bicycle swarmed by, the sound fading. "I want to know him," she finally said. "Not just like that. I mean - yes, like that too. But I also just want to be with him. Talk. Laugh. See how he thinks." She was silent for a moment. "And that's almost more dangerous than the rest."

"Why more dangerous?"

"Because bodies are simple. Bodies can control you or they can overpower you, but it's temporary. But when you're in love with someone's mind-" She shook her head. "That's not going away."

"Are you in love?" Margriet asked.

The word was in the air. She had said it herself before, at that bridge in January, but it was different to say it out loud, in a room, for someone else.

"Yes," she said.

And for the first time it didn't sound like a confession but a fact.

"And Lukas?" Margriet asked.

Rebekah closed her eyes. "I love Lukas. That is also true. They don't exclude each other - and I know how that sounds, I know it sounds like an excuse people make to justify themselves. But it's just the way it is. I love him. And I'm in love with James. And I have no idea what to do with those two truths."

"You don't have to do anything with it today," Margriet said.

"But at some point-"

"At some point, I will. But not today."

They drove out of the session. Margriet asked questions that she kept asking at home: What is Lukas to you? What's missing? What does James give you that you can't find elsewhere?

Asked what Lukas was for her, she had said: safety. And then she had heard herself say and thought: is security enough? And immediately after: is it fair not to find safety enough if someone gives you everything he has?

She had no answer.

She left the practice in the bright March sunlight and stood still on the sidewalk for a moment. The city was full of people who held their faces up. A woman with a stroller. Two men laughing at something on a phone. An older man with a newspaper under his arm who sat on a bench in the sun with the satisfied look of someone who had found the right time.

She picked up her phone. She wanted to call James - not to say anything, just to hear his voice. She didn't. She put her phone away and walked to her bike and drove to the office.

She worked that afternoon. She worked well, concentrated, the kind of focus that comes when you need it and that at the same time was proof that even beyond all this she had a life, an identity, a work that satisfied her in a way that was separate from men and choices and the complicated geometry of the heart.

At four o'clock there was a message from James.

No words. Just a picture: the apartment, the converted living room, the large window with the afternoon light in it. The new parquet on the floor, just laid. The space as she had conceived it.

Underneath he wrote: It's starting to look like your idea.

She stared at the photo. She saw the space she had designed, the wall that was gone, the light that did what she had said it would do. There was something peculiarly moving about it - something of her thoughts that had become matter, her ideas that had taken up space in the world.

She wrote back: Nice.

He: You.

She held her breath. She looked at that one word on her screen.

You.

She put her phone down. She looked at her screen full of work. She got up and walked to the window of her office and looked down at the street and felt her heart pounding in a way that was soft but also relentless, like water finding its way.

That night she ate with Lukas at his mother's. It was nice, as it always was - his mother cooked too much and asked questions about her work and gave her a framed photo of Lukas as a child that she had deepened, and Lukas was shy and his mother was proud and Rebekah looked at him and thought: I know this face. I know his shy smile and the way he touches his hair when he's nervous and the smell of his neck in the morning.

She knew him.

And she wondered if knowing was enough. Or maybe it was too much. Or made a difference.

In the car back Lukas put his hand on her knee the way he always did - not consciously, just habit, a touch that said: you're here, I'm here, we're together. She looked at his hand. She thought of another hand, palm up on a table, who demanded nothing but offered everything.

She put her hand over his.

She didn't close her eyes. She didn't drive away. She did nothing drastic.

She just sat still. With his hand under hers. With the night outside. With everything she knew and everything she didn't know and everything that was yet to come.

# Chapter 11

It started with an evening that should not have happened.

Vera was away for the weekend - her sister in The Hague, a long planned visit, two nights. She had casually mentioned it to Rebekah during a telephone consultation about suppliers, as you call things that are not important. Rebekah had listened and nodded and then she had sent a message to James: Vera told me she was away this weekend.

She had sent it before she thought. Whether she had thought, but not about whether she would send it. Just about how.

He had not answered for a long time. Long enough that she thought he would be silent, that he would think it wise not to respond to a message that asked something so clearly without asking.

Then: Friday night. Just say where.

She had put her phone down. She had taken a glass of water. She had drunk it while looking out to the street where nothing special happened and everything went on as usual.

She had sent back: With me. Lukas is with a friend.

And after that there had been no way back, although there probably hadn't been for a long time.

Friday. Seven hours.

She had cleaned the apartment in a way she couldn't explain herself - it was already clean, but she had vacuumed and straightened the pillows and bought fresh flowers at the market and then looked at those flowers with something between embarrassment and determination. She had colded two bottles of wine. She had changed her clothes three times.

She was now standing in the kitchen in a dark blue dress she almost never wore, her hair down, and waiting for the bell.

When it went, the feeling in her stomach was not butterflies. It was heavier than that. Poet. Something she felt in her throat and her hands and the inside of her wrists.

She opened the door.

James was standing in the hallway. He had brought a bottle of wine - red, a good one, she could see it on the label - and he was wearing a dark shirt, the top two buttons open. His hair was just a little less combed than usual. His eyes went over her in a way that was slow and conscious and tried nothing to hide.

"Hello," she said.

"Hello."

She stepped aside. He walked in. He smelled of something warm - not aftershave, a little more subtle, his own scent mixed with the cold outside air. She closed the door.

They stood in the hallway of her apartment and looked at each other.

"You bought flowers," he said.

"I always buy flowers."

"Hm." The little smile. "And that dress you?"

"I always wear dresses."

"Okay." His eyes were warm. "Then I'm glad you always wear dresses."

She took the wine from his hands - more to have something to do than to drink - and walked to the kitchen. He followed. She opened the bottle, poured it, gave him a glass. Their fingers did touch each other this time, a fraction, a short warmth that they both registered and left.

They sat down in the living room. They talked, as they always did - about the apartment that was almost finished, about an exhibition he had seen, about a book she had read. The conversation was easy and familiar and meanwhile there was something else, a flow underneath, an awareness of each other's presence that had nothing to do with words.

He sat diagonally opposite her on the couch, his elbow on the handrail, his glass in his hand. She saw how he looked at her as she spoke - not impatient, not hungry in a turbulent way, but with an attention that almost hurt. As if she was the most important thing in space. As if there was nothing but her voice and her face and the way she used her hands when she explained something.

She stopped halfway through a sentence.

"What?" She said.

"Nothing," he said. "I'm listening."

"You look."

"That too."

She put down her glass. He did his too.

The space between them was maybe half a meter. She had measured that space countless times in recent months without doing it, had always known about it, had always stayed in it. Now that space seemed something different - not a border but an invitation.

"James," she said.

"Yes."

"We're going to do this."

It was not a question. It wasn't asking for permission either. It was an observation, clear and inevitable, the sentence of someone who made a decision and now pronounces it.

He moved. Slowly, so slowly, as he did everything - not in a hurry, not with the hungry recklessness she had expected and feared and perhaps also wanted a little. He moved up to her and put his hand along her jaw and looked at her from so close that she saw the color of his eyes, dark brown, a color she had not yet known.

"Yes," he said. "We're going to do this."

And then he kissed her.

This was different from the first kiss in the apartment. It had been tender, cautious, exploratory - the kiss of two people starting something. This was the kiss of two people who had known for a long time and who couldn't stop it. He kissed her with an intensity that was quiet but deep, his hands in her hair, and she felt it pulling through her like a tone that has been delayed too long - that feeling of finally, from here you are, of I've been waiting for you without knowing I was waiting.

She pulled him closer. She felt his weight, the width of his shoulders under her hands, the warmth of his skin through the fabric of his shirt. He tasted red wine and something else, something of his own, something that already felt familiar in a way she could not explain.

He pulled his head back a fraction. Looked at her.

"Everything okay?" He said softly.

She didn't answer with words. She grabbed the collar of his shirt and pulled him back to her.

Later, much later, they lay still.

The bedroom light was off. The orange of the streetlights filtered through the curtains. She lay on her side, her head on his chest, his arm around her in an attitude that felt so obvious that it was almost terrifying - as if their bodies had long known how to fit together before their heads had decided.

His hand moved slowly over her back. Back and forth. No hurry. Just present.

"James," she said.

"Mm."

"Say something."

"What should I say?"

She thought. "Say you've wanted this for a long time."

A silence. His hand stopped for a moment. Then: "I've wanted this for a long time." He brought his lips to her hair. "Longer than I would admit."

She put her hand on his chest. She felt his heartbeat, regular, calm. She found it strange and beautiful how a body just went on - heartbeat, breathing, warmth - while everything around it was complicated and broken and alive at the same time.

"Are you afraid?" She asked.

"For what?"

"For what this means. For what's coming now."

He was silent long enough that she knew he was really thinking and didn't put together a reassuring answer. "Yes," he finally said. "But not in the way that would make me stop."

She closed her eyes. She smelled his skin. She thought of Lukas, three blocks away with his friend, unsuspecting, and felt the pain sharply and real. She allowed that pain. She didn't push him away.

Because that was the thing - she couldn't do this and at the same time pretend it didn't hurt. She couldn't have something like that alive without feeling the sharp edge of it. She chose both: the living and the pain.

"Do you stay?" She asked.

His arm pulled her a little closer. "A few more hours."

That was enough. For now.

They lay still. Outside a night bus drove by, lights are just as visible through the curtains. Somewhere in the building someone laughed, loud and fast, the sound of a joke that was perfectly timed.

She thought: this is real now.

She slept in his arms with that realization like a stone and a feather at the same time in her chest.

## Chapter 12

The morning after was soft.

She woke up before he did. She lay still and looked at him - his face relaxed in sleep, the gray spots near his temples sharply in the early light, a small wrinkle in his forehead that did not completely disappear even at rest, as if even his sleeping face thought. She felt like she was seeing something few people saw. His face in the morning. His breath without guard.

She got up. She put on his shirt - it was on the floor, the easiest thing that was available - and walked to the kitchen. She made coffee. She stood by the window and looked at the street that started itself up: a neighbor with a dog, a woman with shopping bags, a man on a bicycle who was driving too fast for the early hour.

She felt different than she expected.

She had thought she would feel guilty in a paralyzed way - overwhelmed, defeated, full of regret that would make her legs heavy. She felt guilty. It was there, real and present, a heavy layer under everything. But below - or above, she didn't know how to organize the layers - there was also this: a calm. A feeling of: this is who I am now. This is what I chose.

She heard him wake up. The small sound of someone finding their orientation, the soft shuffle of sheets.

Then, a few minutes later, his voice from the doorway: "Is that my shirt?"

She turned around. He was standing in the kitchen doorway. Her hair loose. His gaze warm and a little sleepy, that rare vulnerability of someone you see before they are fully awake.

"Yes," she said.

"It suits you better than me."

She poured him a cup of coffee. He walked up to her, took the head, and before he did anything else, he wrapped his free arm around her and pulled her against him. Not begging - just heat. The morning species. She put her head against his chest and they stood at the kitchen window with their coffee and looked at the street and said nothing for a while.

It felt dangerous how just it felt.

"James," she said.

"Mm."

"You have to leave later."

"I know."

"And this-" She searched for words. "This changes everything."

"I know that too." His arm held her a little tighter. "But it changed everything long before last night."

She couldn't deny that. The border had shifted a long time ago, in small steps, in messages and cans and folded hands on tables. Last night had only been the point where they stopped pretending.

They drank their coffee. They talked about little things - an article he had read, a funny anecdote about his week. They sat at her kitchen table in his shirt and her underwear and his coat over a chair, and it was intimate in a way that went beyond the night before. Because a night is a thing - a body is a thing - but this was his coffee cup in her kitchen and his eyes over the edge of the table and the way he listened when she spoke.

He got up at nine o'clock.

"I have to go," he said.

She nodded. She sat down while he got dressed. She watched him put on his shirt - her shirt, now back off her shoulders - and close his belt and put on his watch. Small actions. Ordinary actions. She kept them all.

At the door he turned around. He looked at her.

"Rebekah."

"Yes."

"I'm not going to let this go."

She got up. She walked up to him and took his face between her hands and kissed him - not long, not passionately, but just enough. A promise in a kiss.

"Me neither," she said.

He left. She heard his footsteps on the stairs, the sound of the outside door closing. She walked back to the kitchen. She took his empty coffee cup and washed it.

She stood by the sink and looked at her hands in the warm water.

You are now someone who does this, she said to herself.

She waited for the dislike. He didn't come.

Only the guilt. And next to it, inevitable and alive and hers: the memory of his skin.

## Chapter 13

They kept the secret the way people keep secrets that are big: by being small.

Small adjustments in what they said. Small waiting times before they responded to messages, so it wasn't too fast. Small geographical choices - never near places where they could be seen, never in the same cafes where they normally came. They became experts in the logistics of hiding, although they had never consulted about the rules. They were just there, unspoken, understood.

They saw each other when they could. Which was not as often as they wanted and was more often than wise.

A Tuesday afternoon in April: they met in a museum downtown. Rebekah had said she had to visit a client on the other side of town. James had canceled a meeting in a way Vera hadn't noticed. They walked through the halls of the museum as if they were two acquaintances who happened to visit the same exhibition at the same time, but their arms touched each other at every step, their voices soft, their eyes too long.

At a painting - a large, dark canvas of a woman by a window, her back to the painter, her face invisible - they stopped.

"She's looking outside," Rebekah said.

"To what?"

"You don't know that. That is the point." She looked at the canvas. "She can look at anything. Or to nothing. The painter won't give you an answer."

James stood behind her. Close. She felt his presence along her back, the warmth floating an inch of her skin. "Maybe she's looking at something she can't have," he said softly.

She didn't turn around. "Or to something she already has and doesn't know how to hold yet."

His hand - invisible to the other museum visitors, hidden in the small space between their bodies - found the small of her back. A touch. Nothing more. But she felt it through the fabric of her coat and held her breath.

"James," she whispered.

"I know." But his hand remained.